

Belief and Behavior

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In the Vatican's Sistine Chapel, behind the altar you can view Michelangelo's breathtaking depiction of the Last Judgment. It has been recently restored, so the colors and the subtleties of the painting stand out more clearly. At the center of the painting is the risen Savior, huge in proportion to the other figures, and surrounded by light. With bigger than life sweeping motions, he is lifting one arm in an upward motion, calling the saved to Heaven, and with the left arm thrust downward, the damned are consigned to the fires of Hell.

As I studied the figures of the painting, the hundreds of humans depicted, some being taken up into Heaven by the angels and others pulled, punched and prodded downward, a figure stood out among the others. He was being hurled down, a serpent had wrapped itself around his legs and his face was filled with horror. But his eyes are what caught my attention. The eyes of this damned soul were bulging out, almost out of their sockets. I understood what the painter was trying to tell us. I read it in the face and eyes of this poor soul on his way to Hell. His eyes were wide open because now at the end he was awakened to the stark reality that God is real, there is a judgment, and now he must pay the price for the godless life he lived. He now was awake. It was as if I could hear that condemned man speak:

"If only I had awakened sooner. If only I had taken God more seriously. If only I had not lived such a sinful life. If only...If only..."

It is an awakening that Jesus is calling us: "Be constantly on the watch. Stay awake. You do not know when the appointed time will come." What God is calling us to wake up to is the important fact that there are two parts to the Gospel of Jesus: the first is the believing part, and the second is the behaving part.

The poor soul in Michelangelo's Last Judgment had a rude awakening, and discovered that fact -- too late. He perhaps had gone through life like many of us do. We boldly claim we believe but our behavior tells another story. "Be constantly on the watch. Stay awake," Jesus urges us. A survey asked: "What is the significance of Christmas?" Only three percent said the Birth of Jesus. Most said family togetherness. The survey reveals deep problems in our society.

On the other hand, there are some signs of a new awakening going on in the lives of some today. Lately I've been meeting with many people who have finally awakened to the reality that God is calling them to a new way of living and a behavior that is consistent with belief in Jesus. It is awesome to witness: people who have not been to confession in 25 years, crying tears of joy as they hear the anointed words of forgiveness coming from the mouth of a priest. Some people have been invited by a friend to return to church, and upon coming they've stayed because they heard a message that touched their heart, and they woke up and made a decision: "I want to live a different way. I want to live for Christ."

It is awesome and beautiful to behold for me. What a grace it is to hear that message: "I want to live for Christ."

Perhaps we've been dozing a bit and our behavior has started to bear marks of godlessness rather than Godliness. Hear the call. Wake up. You do not know when the appointed time will come, the time for you to stand before the majesty of God in judgment.

There are so many signs of God's presence around us. We need to do what most of us learned as youngsters, when we were to cross a street our folks told us as youngsters to do three things: STOP, LOOK AND LISTEN. If our behavior is to correspond to our belief in Jesus, we have to stop, look and listen. Stop running away from God and running with the ways of the world. Look and see the way Jesus has paved for you to a new way of living. Look and see Christ is real and is calling you. Look and see what you're doing with your life. Are you living for God? Listen to God calling you to a deeper relationship. Wake up, change your ways and live for Jesus.

If we take the message to heart. Belief and behavior have to go together, they are two parts of the Gospel. I shall never forget the image of that condemned man in Michelangelo's painting. I can hear him speak to me. His mouth is open in a silent cry. His eyes are bulging with awareness of what is happening. I could hear him speak. "Wake up...Watch out...Be on guard." Listen. Can you hear Him?